



USDA Forest Service Santa Fe National Forest

Briefing Paper Santa Fe Municipal Watershed Fuels Reduction Project

December 2015

Background: The Santa Fe Municipal Watershed Project was developed by a collaborative group that included the City of Santa Fe (City), the Santa Fe National Forest (SNFN), the Santa Fe Watershed Association (SFWA), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in the aftermath of the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire. The intent was to develop a long-term management plan to provide a reliable supply of water for city residents by maintaining the health of the forest and proactively addressing the fire hazard within the Watershed's 17,384 acres.

The Santa Fe Municipal Watershed Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) analyzed up to 7,270 acres of thinning and prescribed fire in the non-wilderness section of the Watershed. Over the last 11 years, the City and the SNFN have treated approximately 6,700 acres under this decision. Approximately 5,500 acres have been thinned by a combination of methods including thinning/piling with chainsaws and mastication. During the early stages of the project, hand thinning and mastication were contracted out at a cost of \$945/acre. Small trees (4" diameter and below) were thinned and piled with some larger trees cut and left on slopes for erosion control.

Most of the piles have been burned, and recently, the City and the SNFN conducted prescribed burns on larger areas (approximately 1,000 acres at a time) using aerial ignition methods that cost around \$100/acre. Forest and City crews have also piled and burned smaller acreages in critical locations, including near riparian area and along the boundary with private lands on the northwest side of the Watershed.

To build on this collaborative environment, the Forest Service awarded a grant to the SFWA and TNC through the Forest Service's Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP). This grant funded the development of a "Santa Fe Watershed Plan," which created a common vision for vegetation management, water management, public outreach, and financing. Although each of these pieces is important, the financial management plan broke new ground by providing a mechanism for the City to directly support fuels reduction efforts in the Watershed.

To further advance the successful planning and implementation collaboration, the SNFN proposed treatments in the upper portion of the Watershed that lies within the Pecos Wilderness. The Santa Fe Municipal Watershed Pecos Wilderness Prescribed Burn Project Environmental Assessment (EA), which was funded by the City and signed in spring 2015, authorizes aerial ignition within a 2,900-acre Wilderness area with no preparation, such as fire line construction, to minimize impacts to wilderness character.

Current Status: Under the **Santa Fe Municipal Watershed FEIS** decision, mechanical and hand thinning has occurred on approximately 5,500 acres, and prescribed fire has occurred on approximately 6,700 acres. Key areas to the west and north in the project area require prescribed fire to reach desired conditions (approximately 800 acres). Second- and third-entry burns will continue across the project area to maintain desired conditions.

Under the **Santa Fe Municipal Watershed Pecos Wilderness Prescribed Burn Project EA** decision, up to 2,900 acres of prescribed fire treatments may begin as early as winter/spring 2016, but that decision is highly dependent on weather and winter snow pack to provide proper conditions.

Key Points:

- The Watershed consists of 17,384 acres across multiple ownership boundaries: SFNF (15,493 acres), City (1,124 acres) and private (767 acres). Approximately 10,000 acres of the upper Watershed lies in the Pecos Wilderness.
- A four-year agreement between the City and the SFNF was signed in September 2015 to continue to jointly fund implementation in the Watershed. The SFNF and the City will each contribute \$60,000 per year to the project.
- Partners in the implementation and monitoring of this project over several years have included the City of Santa Fe (which has also provided financial assistance), the Santa Fe Watershed Association, the New Mexico Environment Department, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the College of Santa Fe, and the University of New Mexico. Burning operations are coordinated with the City Fire Department, which provides support personnel, and the New Mexico Air Quality Bureau.

Figure 1—Pile Burning



Figure 2—Broadcast burning



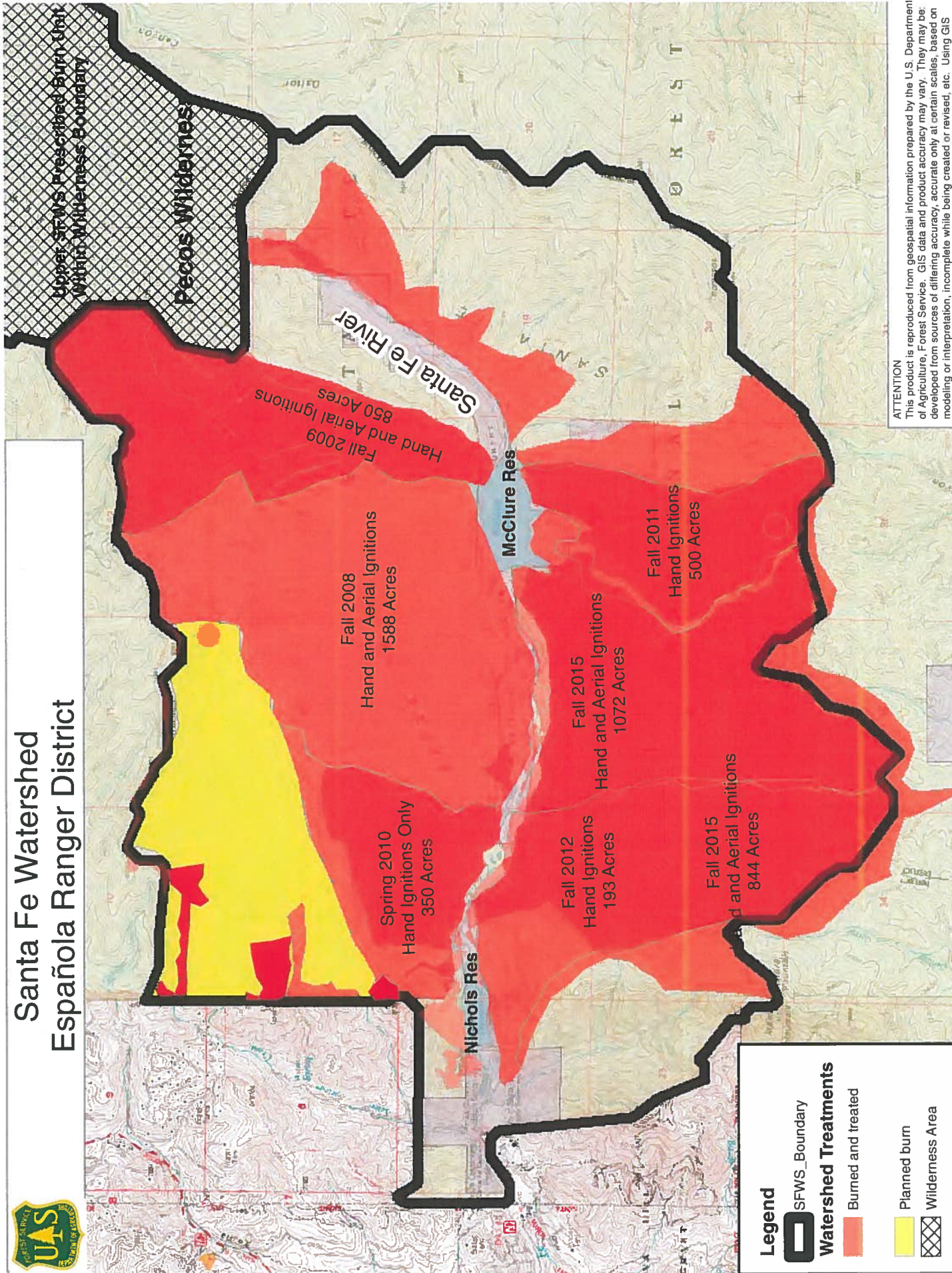
Figure 3--Broadcast burning from the air

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Santa Fe Watershed Española Ranger District



Legend

SFWS_Boundary

Watershed Treatments

Burned and treated

Planned burn

Wilderness Area



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